

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D 7WASHINGTON POST
4 November 1984

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Soviet Jews: 'Emigration Is Over'

There has always been an ugly linkage between the Kremlin's anti-Western spasms and anti-Semitic proclivities. Whenever the old Bolsheviks intensify their efforts to undermine the foreign policy and security arrangements of the United States, the Jews who live under their rule pay a terrible price.

During the era of détente, the Jews were tolerated and allowed to emigrate. The high point came in 1979, when 51,320 Jews were permitted to leave their Soviet homeland. But the following year, when President Carter ordered a boycott of the Moscow Olympics in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only 21,471 Jews emigrated.

The flood of émigrés continued to ebb under President Reagan until it became a trickle. Now it is an agonizing drip. Only 730 Jews have been permitted to leave the Soviet Union this year. About 25 got permission to emigrate in the first three weeks of last month.

In fact, State Department sources told my associate Lucette Lagnado, Soviet authorities no longer make even a pretense of giving hope to the refusniks, as would-be Jewish émigrés are called. In recent weeks, the KGB has told those who apply for exit visas to forget it: emigration is over.

The situation appears to be worse than that, according to classified State Department intelligence reports. They suggest that Jews have resumed their historical role in Russia as the government's favorite punching bags.

An especially poignant case was that of Iosif Begun, a teacher of Hebrew. He was arrested and "his prayer book was taken away from him," a confidential cable to the State Department from the Moscow embassy states. Begun responded with the only weapon of protest available to him: a hunger strike.

"It lasted 60 days," the cable notes. "It was ended when he was force-fed by the authorities." That was last July.

The teacher's wife has been trying in vain to visit him in detention. "His wife went to the prison three times," the cable states, "and was not permitted to see him. His family will not be permitted to see him until June 1985."

Other, similar examples lead Soviet analysts here to conclude that the quiet persecution has become official policy.

But it gets even worse. In recent months, the KGB has planted evidence of criminal behavior as a means of harassing Jews who persist in asking to leave the country. For example, another teacher of Hebrew, Yulik Edelshtein was arrested after a quantity of hashish had been planted on him. Another Jewish activist had a gun planted on him by the KGB, according to cable traffic.

So harsh has the official crackdown on Jews become in recent months that Kremlinologists have coined the word "neo-Stalinism" to describe it. The reference to the most notorious anti-Semite of modern Russian history is chilling, but my sources say it is a reasonably accurate assessment of the new policy—though it has not yet reached the bloodthirsty excesses of Stalin's era.

Sources at the Helsinki Commission, which still tries to monitor human rights abuses in the Soviet Union, say they have received reports of Christian dissidents who have died in suspicious circumstances while serving prison terms. There would undoubtedly be harder evidence of such persecution if the commission's activists within the Soviet Union had not been imprisoned or harassed to the point of helplessness.

Both Republican and Democratic candidates have pledged that the plight of Soviet Jews will be an important part of future discussions with the Soviet leadership. Former presidents Ford and Carter have joined in a bipartisan letter to Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko on behalf of Soviet Jewry.

But if the past is any indication, the Jews in the Soviet Union will again take second place to policy matters considered by the two superpowers to be of greater national interest.

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